

## 17. THE RENAISSANCE

### A HISTORICAL ESSAY

Eternal salvation, protection from enemies, and sufficient food and shelter were the chief concerns of medieval man. Bound to the soil he tilled, the medieval peasant looked to his lord to save him from enemies and to his priest to save him from eternal damnation. The warrior-noble, charged with protecting and governing his society, depended on his land to feed his body and on his church to feed his soul. The priest, watching over the spiritual needs of his people, relied on the sword of the noble and the hoe of the peasant to meet his earthly needs.

At least in theory, every man had a place in medieval society, doing his duty to God and to his fellow men. But gradually changes began to take place. Toward the end of the tenth century, enemy invasions subsided. At the end of the eleventh century, Europeans marched off to the Middle East on the Crusades. Trade with the East, from which many Italian cities profited, extended into northern Europe, making the French and Germans less dependent on their own resources. No longer tied to the manors economically, medieval men began to move to the cities. There a new social structure gradually evolved.

The changes that transformed Europe started in Italy's cities—Venice, Florence, Genoa, Pisa, Milan, and Naples. (See map, p. 83.) Unlike other cities in Europe, they had not declined much during the Middle Ages. Many nobles had moved from their rural manors into the cities at the earliest opportunity. Serfs were not as large a proportion of Italy's lower class as they were elsewhere in Europe. Commerce grew rapidly in the cities and created the dynamic urban life that in turn helped to create the Renaissance. Seaports, particularly Venice and Genoa, served as transfer points between Europe and the East. The Crusades increased the flow of people, trade, and ideas through the Italian seaports.

Italian manufacturing developed in the wake of the trading vessels. Needing goods to exchange for the spices, jewels, and silk of the East, merchants invested in cloth and leather industries and in shipbuilding. They imported raw wool and skins, and their ships carried finished cloth and leather goods to other ports. They used their profits to hire more workers and buy more tools. As the merchants gained control of manufacturing, they broke the monopoly of the guilds over urban economic decisions.

The merchants also invested in banking. With the increase in trade came a demand for more money. Clothmakers, for instance, might need to buy large quantities of wool before they had enough money available. Many merchants lent their extra money to such men to finance their enterprises. In return, the borrowers paid a certain percentage of interest on the loans. Lending money proved so profitable that many businessmen gave up their other activities to devote their entire financial resources to banking.

As trade, manufacturing, and banking increased, prices began to rise. Many nobles who owned land outside the cities could not pay all their debts, and they found it necessary to mortgage or sell their land to the merchants and bankers. As the urban businessmen became landowners, the cities gained political control of the countryside.

During the Middle Ages, wealth had gone to those who had political power. During the Renaissance, political power went to those who had wealth. In the tenth century, many Italian cities had become part of the Holy Roman Empire, which was ruled by German emperors. These



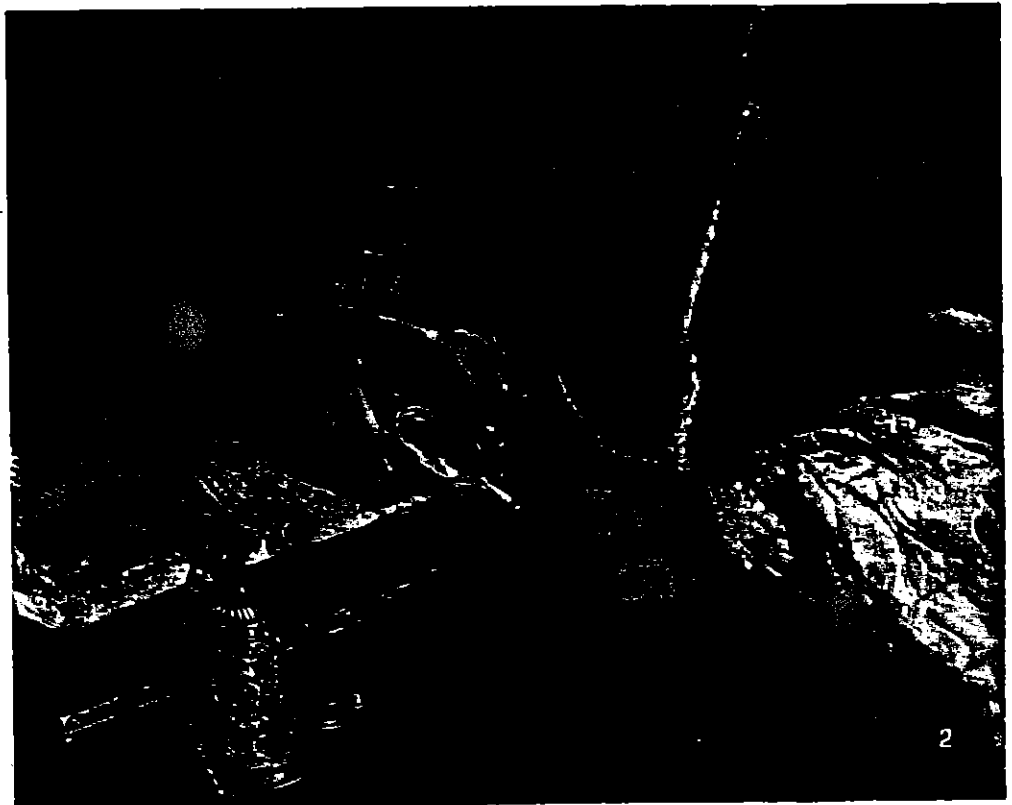
emperors were continually involved in political struggles with the German nobles and the Italian popes. As a result, they could not watch over the growing cities, and the businessmen were able to win political control.

At first, the great merchant and banking families vied with each other for control of the cities. They bought votes in the municipal elections and hired mercenary, or paid, armies. Eventually, one family, such as the Visconti and Sforzas of Milan or the Medici of Florence, acquired enough power to become powerful rulers. Their mercenary armies

The Holy Roman Empire was created in 800 when the pope crowned Otto I of Germany emperor over Germany and most of Italy. The empire lasted in name until 1806, but it never achieved political unity.



Churchmen are selling indulgences, which were pardons for sins. Originally, indulgences were given only to a person who had performed some good work. But Renaissance popes began to give out indulgences in return for money.



Detail from a portrait of Pope Leo X by Raphael showing the wealth of the upper clergy.



These pictures show conditions within parts of the Church during the Renaissance. How had the Church changed since the medieval period? Do you think any of these changes might become problems for the Church? If so, how?

This illustration shows Rome as a widow dressed in rags, forsaken by the popes who have moved to Avignon during the period known as the Babylonian Captivity.

crushed threats to their power. But always they had to be on guard against popular rebellions and other ambitious families.

Money and credit replaced land as the means of acquiring goods. Renaissance men also took interest in New World explorations and in the discoveries of science. With the expansion of commerce and the rise of a wealthy, politically powerful urban class, the city became the focus of life in Italy and the source of the development of Renaissance values.

Renaissance interest in worldly affairs resulted in part from a decline in the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Much of medieval life had been guided by the doctrines of the Church. The Church participated in political decisions and often forced kings and nobles to change their policies in the interest of the Church. But such interference eventually brought the Church into conflict with political rulers. As the European monarchs gained more power, they defied the rulings of the Church. In fact, the French king was able to influence the selection of the pope. The new pope then moved to Avignon in southern France.

Along with these developments, the moral authority of the Church also declined. Although the popes at Avignon were no longer able to dictate to the monarchs, the papal court was one of the grandest in Europe. The magnificent palace was adorned with many of the finest works of art. Bishops imitated the papal splendor. This interest in earthly concerns caused many people to question the spiritual authority of the Church. Reformers began to question its doctrines with greater frequency. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, John Wycliffe and John Huss attacked the worldliness of the Church and tried unsuccessfully to reform it. But in the early sixteenth century, this movement led to the Protestant Reformation and to reform within the Roman Catholic Church itself.

The worldliness of the Italians also made the Church more secular, or interested in earthly affairs. As Renaissance values took hold, men with a more secular outlook joined the ranks of the clergy. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini who became Pope Pius II in 1458 carried his values with him to the papacy. (See p. 65.) Julius II, pope from 1503 to 1513, commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

The clergy, the despots, the merchants, and the bankers all promoted Renaissance values through their patronage of the arts. In medieval times, the greatest market for artistic works was the Church. Painters contributed altarpieces, sculptors fashioned statues, and musicians composed and performed music for the Church. But the Renaissance leaders, eager to display their wealth, commissioned paintings, sculpture, and music for their personal enjoyment. The Medici employed Michelangelo to carve statues for their town house in Florence. Popes and bishops also were interested in glorification through art. Such patronage gave Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Cellini, Bandinello, Petrarch, and

The popes resided in Avignon until 1378. Petrarch named this period the "Babylonian Captivity," an allusion to the captivity of the ancient Jews in Babylonia. The Babylonian Captivity is discussed further in Chapter 4.

John Wycliffe and John Huss were forerunners of the Reformation. They will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

The Sistine Chapel is a private chapel of the popes in the Vatican.

many others the means to create one of the most magnificent cultural achievements in the history of the world.

What was this burst of cultural activity like? What values were expressed? These questions can be answered by looking first at the art of the Renaissance and second at its literature. The artists' subjects reflected the earthly concerns of their patrons. Although much of Renaissance art was devoted to religious themes—Michelangelo's *David* or Leonardo's *Last Supper*, for example—the artists handled these subjects in a worldly manner. Raphael's portrait of Pope Julius II and Ghirlandaio's portrait of Count Sassetti reflected the interest of these leaders in their personal glory. Classical subjects offered still another theme, of which Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* and Raphael's *The School of Athens* are examples.

Unlike medieval art, Renaissance art was intended to glorify its artists. Like their patrons, Renaissance painters and sculptors wanted to be remembered for their personal contributions. They competed to find new ways to express themselves on canvas, in stone, or with precious metals. Individualism, a characteristic of humanism, was the mood in art. Each artist developed a personal style.

Renaissance artists tried to represent the world as it actually existed. They studied anatomy so they could paint the human form more accurately. They developed perspective, making distant objects smaller than those in the foreground, thus giving depth to canvas instead of just height and width.

The secular concerns of the Renaissance also dominated its literature. Medieval writers had worried about the relationship of the state to the Church and about the individual's obligations to God. But Petrarch's sonnets focused on woman's beauty. Boccaccio described the values and life-styles of Renaissance life. Castiglione instructed courtiers to delight in beauty and gracious living. And the great political scientist of the time, Niccolo Machiavelli, advised princes about how to stay in power instead of discussing the role of religion in government.

As Renaissance people developed secular values, they rediscovered the classical world and the humanism of the Greeks. Remnants of Greek sculpture and literature had always been present in Europe, but Renaissance people found new meaning in them. They rediscovered the writings of Homer, Plato, and Cicero. The ancient civilizations seemed to justify their new attitudes toward the individual and the world when their religion could not.

The Renaissance was a rediscovery of the delights and beauty of this world. Sometimes using examples from ancient times and sometimes not, Renaissance man changed the direction of European history. Never again would western men be so occupied with the next world that they would ignore this one.

